

**A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church**  
**By Chris Fillingham**  
**“Singing for the Soul”**  
**Acts 16:16-25**  
**4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter**  
**April 22, 2018**

Brandt and Theo are at that really wonderful age where they do and say things that are so funny or just really endearing because they haven't learned to be self-conscious yet. You know how 5 year-olds can be.

They just are who they are. They haven't gotten too many messages to hide their true self, or to be embarrassed, or ashamed. So things just come out of them.

Sometimes that's as simple as deciding to be a frog in the morning and hopping around the house while I'm getting ready for work.

Sometimes it's asking questions about their bodies that make you giggle just a bit, but you try not to show it.

And sometimes it's just being really creative.

One of those creative things that comes out of kids at this age is singing. And when a 5 year old sings a song you can almost guarantee that they are making up at least half the words because they haven't really learned them yet.

And sometimes they're making up the whole thing.

You're driving down the road and all of a sudden you hear this little voice in the back making up some song about, Jesus loves everyone and God is in my heart and you just melt and think to yourself, [pause] **“Dear Lord, maybe I haven't ruined my kids after all! There's still hope!”**

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It's fascinating, isn't it, the way someone's singing can have such an effect on you? And it's not just 5 year olds you love. It's true of teenagers and grandparents... of opera singers and folk singers... of voices you hear in the church and voices you hear on the radio... and apparently even voices you might hear in prison.

Paul and Silas have come to Philippi and met a woman named Lydia and started a church there in Lydia's home... the same church, by the way... that the letter in our Bible was written to. We'll be hearing from Paul's letter to the Philippians in May.

Apparently, Paul and Silas stayed in Philippi for a while when they first started that church, and one day ...Paul got annoyed with this slave who was following them around and casts an evil spirit out of her.

*[I don't know about you, but there are a few annoying people in my life that I'd like to cast a demon out of.]*

The slave girl was healed of that annoying quality, but it didn't go over well with some of the locals... because they were making money off of her.

So they had Paul and Silas arrested, and beaten, and put in shackles,

and thrown into a Philippi prison... as we heard earlier.

I imagine it was a pretty dark night for Paul and Silas.  
It wouldn't be far off to imagine they had a few broken ribs and bloody eyes.  
And they don't know how long they will be there,  
or *if* they will get out ,  
or what in the world was going to happen next.

But by some holy prompt, in the middle of the night they started singing. And the other prisoners... who probably had no idea who these guys were or why they were there... "began listening to them"... the scripture says.

Now it doesn't tell us that they were listening because of how beautiful Paul and Silas sounded. I imagine all beat up, their voices weren't nearly as nice as Megan's voice or Marsha's voice ... Paul and Silas were no Johnny Cash singing Folsom Prison.

I'd guess that the prisoners weren't drawn to how *good or bad* they sounded. I imagine they were simply drawn to how *human* they sounded.

Because there is something powerful about hearing another person's voice singing, isn't there? It gets in us. It takes us places.

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About 12 years ago Jessi and I went to India for a month with a group from Baylor. We were traveling all around to different parts of the country, learning about different approaches to Christianity in a Hindu context.

And I remember one day in particular when our group began to hit bottom after being there.

It was hot and dusty.

We were all shoved into an old van to go visit a few different sites around the city. Honestly, I still don't know exactly what we were supposed to be doing that day. All I do know is that nothing was going as planned.

We'd get somewhere and start to get out of the van, and find out we were either in the wrong place, or at the wrong time, or something had fallen through... and we'd shove ourselves back into this old van... some of us sitting shoulder to shoulder on the few seats there were. Some of us sitting on the floor... all of us getting more and more sweaty, and irritated, and hungry.

As the day went on the tension in the van was rising.

Everyone grew silent.

We were bouncing down the road,  
with no idea where we were going,  
or how much longer it would be,  
or when we might find food and water.

It's one of those moments where you know... everyone was on edge.

I can still remember just how irritated I was getting...  
when out of the tense silence came one timid voice:  
"Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice."

Let me just say, hearing that was irritating...but it kept going.

"Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice."

Someone else joined in.

"Rejoice, rejoice and again I say rejoice."

I shook my head and cracked a smile.

"Rejoice, rejoice and again I say rejoice."

Finally, more of us joined in.

"Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice." [sing it all, motion to the congregation to join me]

Before too long we were all laughing and singing just about every song that we knew from our VBS, and children's church, and preschool days... And that singing completely transformed the rest of that day.

Singing took us somewhere.

It changed each one of us there in the van... each of us individually.

And it changed us as a group.

Because something powerful happens when we sing... something that can shake the ground and break open the jail you're stuck in.

That's what happened that night for Paul, and Silas, and the other prisoners. As Paul and Silas were singing and the other prisoners were listening the scriptures say, *"Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's chains were unfastened."*

This is what singing does.

It shakes up the ground.

It loosens the chains that are wrapped so tightly around you.

And it opens the doors that your soul is trapped behind.

Singing... as individuals... and even more so, singing together, ***has the potential to free the soul... to connect with the Divine.***

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And so I've been doing some thinking about our singing lately. And what is really clear to me is that our singing forms us, and can even ***transform*** us...

It shapes how we think, and feel, and see...

It can shape how we experience our life

and the kind of people we become.

In other words, *"Singing has the potential to free the soul to connect with the divine"*

Which is to say then, that our singing is powerful in ways we often don't recognize. So today, I want to help us recognize a few things about the singing we do together.

You never get 3 clear points in a sermon from me, but I'm going to give you them today. So if you're a 3-point person, today is your day!

Get out your pens and pencils and write this down.

I'm going to give you three important qualities that enable singing to shape the soul. By qualities, I don't mean the kind of harmony you make, but what needs to happen for singing to have the most potential to shape the soul.

First is this: *Singing that engages the mind can free the soul.*

Yes, we need the simple truths that we can grab onto the first time we sing... simple lines that stick with us like, "Rejoice in the Lord always."

But we also need the rich, complex poetry that challenges our minds and imaginations.

And so this morning we sang:

"All ye who are of tender heart, forgiving others, take your part.

Sing his praises, Alleluia!

Ye who long pain and sorrow bear, praise God and on him cast your care,

O praise him, Alleluia!"

It's a mouth full isn't it? And even harder than singing it, is grasping all that with our minds. There's some work for you to do.

You've really got to stop and think about what you're singing there... and all that thinking may lead you to some questions about what exactly that means.

And those questions are good things for you to explore.

So when you pick up a hymnal with us on Sunday morning and we sing something that doesn't make sense to you... then let me invite you to take that hymnal into the office after worship, make a copy of it, and take that home.

Spend some time with the poetry.

Send me an email and ask me about it.

So that next time you sing this, you're not on autopilot, but you're engaging the poetry of it all.

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Now here's the thing: in our church tradition here at Dayspring, we're pretty strong on all this thinking business. In fact, we're a lot better than many Baptist churches in that regard. Every Sunday there's a lot to think about, even just in what we're singing.

But there's a key paradox I want you to get this morning, and that is this: ***Thinking is never the point of our singing.*** Our singing will shape your thinking and can engage your thinking, but thinking is never the point.

Thinking by itself can actually get us stuck. And that's really important for us to hear. Thinking can get us stuck.

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Singing that frees the soul does more than engage our thinking

So here's my second point. Are you ready? Got your pens out?

"Singing that engages the heart can free the soul."

We try hard to pay attention to this as well, but this one is a bit harder for us. In part, because what engages your heart might be different than what engages the heart of the person sitting in front of you or behind you.

Often what engages the heart has a lot to do with the kind of thing you sang when you first began encountering God.

Maybe it was singing you did as a child, or at camp, or in college.  
Maybe it's a particular style of song or hymn,  
Maybe a certain instrument engages your heart more than another.

It can be different for all of us. In fact, I'd love to know which songs open your heart and which don't. Marsha, and Stephanie, and I have wondered aloud about that along the way. We've even talked about doing some congregational surveys about that.

But here's what I do know: Generally things are easier for you to sing...  
because you know them so well,  
or because they are simpler,  
or because you've sang them your whole life,  
or for whatever reason, things that are easier for you to sing, tend to engage the heart.  
You don't have to **think** about it.

That's why we almost always have some simpler things... like a Taizé piece, or our doxology, or a contemplative chorus... something that you can go home singing and carry with you into the week... because those tend to engage the heart in a unique way.

*And singing that engages the heart can free the soul.*

Now, before I give you the last point I do have to say one more thing about the heart. I think it's important that you and I recognize that there are certainly some churches whose forte is singing from the heart...

There are a lot of emotions every week, and some people really need that. And the uncomfortable truth is ***I think we could learn a few things from them. Sometimes we're a little too suspect of emotions.***

But certainly, there's a paradox here too. Singing that is ***all*** emotion week after week... can start to feel pretty contrived. And when there's nothing to engage the mind... it is like ***only eating Easter candy every Sunday.***

Emotions by themselves can give us a sugar high and a sugar crash. And over time that will wreak havoc on the soul... and remember, ***the soul connecting with God is the point.***

***Emotions are never the point of our singing,  
just as thinking is never the point.***

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OK, now for my third point (...you know, for all you engineer-list-loving people.)

"Singing that engages the body can free the soul."

... or I guess I could say, "Singing frees our soul in part because it engages our bodies."

Singing is a very physical act. It uses your gut, and lungs, your mouth, and tongue. You can't sing without engaging your body. And you've been hearing this a lot from me lately, but I'll say it again, "the body is a guide for the soul." It is a means for connecting with God.

And so, something happens in us as we engage even more of our bodies.

That's why, when SUMBC was here last week, they invited us to sway and clap. It's part of their tradition of engaging their bodies. And I think we all felt the way that did something for us too.

And in some traditions you might kneel as you sing certain things.

And here at Dayspring, we ask you to stand and to sit, and stand again... Because engaging our bodies when we sing helps to free the soul... to encounter God.

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So there are three points for you about how singing frees the soul... but they aren't the main point this week.

What I hope you hear more than anything... is that our singing together matters. Our singing together has the *potential*... the **potential** to free the soul to connect with the divine.

And the more you engage in our singing,  
the more you engage it with your mind, your heart, and your body,  
the greater the possibilities for the soul becomes.

Whether you like the song we're singing or not,  
isn't actually the point.

Whether you like the sound of your voice or not,  
isn't the point either.

Freeing your soul to encounter God is the point. That's why we sing!  
When we join our voices *together* something profound begins to stir among us.  
Earthquakes can happen,  
doors can open.

And what has kept us all bound up, can begin to loosen.

It matters that you join your voice with my voice, and the voices in front of you and behind you.

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So let me challenge you to do that as best as you're able every time you come here. Bring your whole self into this space... and know that even if you don't feel the earth moving, someone else in this space just might be.

In fact, I want to invite us to practice that now. We're going to sing a hymn that we began learning last year. It's printed in your worship guide.  
Some of you know this better than others.

But I want to invite all of us who are able, to stand now,  
and engage your whole self as we sing this together, and sing our communion hymn together, and allow all this singing to free the soul,  
So that you are ready to encounter God here at the table.

Let's stand and sing.